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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000584

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR MOPS IS SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON:HIZBALLAH DOES NOT WANT WAR, LAF CHIEF
TELLS CODEL ACKERMAN

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.

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(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a May 27 meeting with Codel Ackerman, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Jean Kahwagi stressed disarming Hizballah was not simply an internal Lebanese problem, but a regional and international problem, dealt with best through political and diplomatic efforts. Israel's continued occupation of Shebaa Farms and Ghajar village "legitimized" Hizballah, he insisted. Kahwagi said he believed the "gateway" to disarmament was to negotiate the return of these Lebanese territories.

¶2. (C) Kahwagi assessed that the Syrians were concerned about terrorists crossing the Lebanese-Syrian border, and reported that Syria had deployed troops on the border to restrict illicit border crossings and weapons smuggling. He said that the LAF had "surrounded" the PFLP-GC base at Qussaya. Kahwagi opined that the general security situation in Lebanon was good and improving. Kahwagi said he did not expect any serious security problems in the runup to the June 7 parliamentary elections. On recently published allegations of Hizballah's involvement in the 2005 assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, Kahwagi stated he believed in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and would take its judgments as the truth. End summary.

HIZBALLAH: NO MOOD FOR WAR

¶3. (C) Codel Ackerman, accompanied by the Ambassador and Emboffs, met with LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi May 27 at Yarze. Codel members were Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-NY; chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee D-TX; Rep. Keith Ellison, D-MN; and HFAC staff member Howard Diamond. Codel members asked several questions about the LAF's relationship with Hizballah and taking action to restrict Hizballah's activities. Kahwagi cautioned that trying to disarm Hizballah now would now lead to a civil war in Lebanon. He argued that the Shia in Lebanon, including Hizballah's Shia supporters, were tired of war. Kahwagi surmised that Hizballah possibly might believe it had enough arms and that

further rearming would be unnecessary. He reaffirmed that the GOL sees Hizballah as a "legitimate" internal resistance and noted it is part of the current national unity government. Kahwagi emphasized that disarming Hizballah was not merely an internal issue, but a regional and international issue requiring a political solution involving input from Syria, Iran, the United States and Israel.

OCCUPIED LEBANESE TERRITORY
LEGITIMIZES HIZBALLAH

¶4. (C) Kahwagi emphasized that Israeli "occupation" of Lebanese territory such as northern Ghajar and Shebaa Farms emboldens Hizballah and provides it "legitimacy" in the opinion of many Lebanese. He added that the recent arrests of over twenty suspected Israeli "spies" in Lebanon (all Lebanese citizens) was a sign that Israel was "seriously violating" UNSCR 1701. He commented that such "spying" could be considered an "act of war." Rep. Ackerman countered, asking if alleged "spying" by Israel justified Hizballah's militias. Kahwagi answered "no," and stated he was only explaining the facts to the Codel. Kahwagi maintained that the GOL would not ask for Hizballah's disarmament while Israel occupied Lebanese territory. The "gateway" to reducing Hizballah's legitimacy was through negotiated withdrawal from Ghajar and Shebaa, Kahwagi remarked. Rep. Ackerman noted that the Israelis had believed withdrawing from Gaza would help support peace and security, but this had not been the case. In a similar fashion, Hizballah and its Syrian agents would ultimately find another "excuse" to maintain a militia in Lebanon even if Israel withdrew from

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Shebaa and Ghajar, Ackerman said.

¶5. (C) Kahwagi assessed Rep. Jackson Lee's concerns about Hizballah provoking another war with Israel as "legitimate," but said the LAF alone could not resolve the issue. He stated the 2006 Hizballah-Israeli war created nearly one million internal refugees, and had destroyed much of the south's infrastructure and economic viability. Kahwagi emphatically said he was certain Hizballah would not want to provoke a war with Israel. "The cost is too high," he concluded.

SYRIANS AND LAF WORKING
ON IMPROVED BORDER SECURITY

¶6. (C) Kahwagi confidently said the overall security situation in Lebanon was good and improving. He mentioned the internal threat of terrorists had diminished since Rep. Ackerman's last visit in December 2008, due in part to U.S. military assistance. "We (the LAF) see and know more," about Fatah al-Islam and other terrorist groups, Kahwagi stated. Kahwagi affirmed that the PFLP-GC base in Qussaya that straddles the Lebanese-Syrian border was "surrounded" by the LAF and was not a transit point for weapons smuggling into Lebanon. Kahwagi assessed that the Syrians were also concerned about porous borders, movements of terrorists, and arms smuggling to extremists such as Fatah al-Islam. Ackerman expanded the discussion to include weapons smuggling to Hizballah and pressed Kahwagi on weapons smuggling through the Syrian border. He noted Lebanon only had two bordering countries (Syria and Israel) from which weapons could pass, implying Syria alone was complicit in weapons smuggling. Kahwagi recounted Syrian troop deployments on the border at 10-15 outposts to control and secure the borders. Kahwagi stressed the difficulty in monitoring the long, often mountainous Syria-Lebanon border.

¶7. (C) Kahwagi said he did not expect any "unusual" events before the June 7 parliamentary elections. He believed any troubles would be relatively minor and controllable.

¶ 8. (C) Kahwagi dismissed recently published allegations of Hizballah's involvement in the 2005 assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri in the German magazine "Der Speigel" as just election-period "stories." Kahwagi stated he believed in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and declared he would take the STL's judgments as the truth. Der Spiegel's accusations were "flawed," he said.

SISON